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Little Red Riding Hood: The other side of the story

ABSTRACT

This article wishes to present three virtual art ecologies that were created in 2013 in the metaverse of Second Life*, involving a reinterpretation of the folk tale Little Red Riding Hood (LRRH). The tale of LRRH has many layers of complexity that are open to many varied interpretations, some of which were tackled by the participating artists and will be discussed in this text. Beyond presenting the work itself, this article also wishes to discuss a theoretical framework regarding storytelling, especially as it relates to today's information society and its offshoots, online virtual worlds.*

KEYWORDS

storytelling
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INTRODUCTION

> One of the great pleasures of narrative is to become lost, immersed in the world the narrative conjures up in our imagination. This sense of presence is just as important to interactive graphical media as to text-based media such as the novel. It is all very much about transformation; Stories take us out of ourselves.
>
> (Fencott 2003)

In early 2013, storyteller and virtual world resident Heidi Dahlsveen/Mimesis Monday curated a themed exhibit in the metaverse of *Second Life*® by inviting

three virtual artists to stage their interpretations of the age-old fairy tale Little Red Riding Hood (henceforth referred to as LRRH) by creating installations that would also be in the nature of art ecologies, in that they would take into account the geography as well as the climate of the virtual land upon which they were placed. The artists were expected to retell the story from their own novel point of view, in effect bringing to the fore what, for them, would be the other side of the tale of LRRH.

The completed installations were open to all *SL* avatars, who could take in the work by walking through the ecologies at their own pace by following paths that they decided upon themselves – thereby also creating their own tales through the non-linearity of what they encountered. Indeed, a second objective of the undertaking was to add yet another layer to the other side of the story by encouraging visitors to add their own interpretations to those of the three artists by engaging in their own storytelling sessions and creative work that further enhanced the project.

THE PROGRESSION OF LRRH

In what follows we want to discuss how a narrative can be told through an installation in a virtual world and how a meeting between oral tradition and the virtual world creates reflection.

There are not too many individuals in western cultures who, as children, did not encounter the tale of LRRH. Some of us remember the story as that of a little girl who was frustrated over not having blonde curls, some of us remember her as a sweet young person who went to visit her ailing grandmother in the forest, while others were traumatized over the killing of the wolf. Indeed the wolf, and the fate that befalls him, is a forceful component of the tale and the encounter between the girl and the wolf are likely to affect us on many levels – some conscious, others subconscious.

According to Jack Zipes, the development of the written story of LRRH is in itself a brutal history in that it is a male creation and projection. Not women, but men – Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm – gave birth to our common conception of LRRH as we know the tale today (Zipes 1993: 80). Zipes points at the existence of an earlier oral narrative in French culture that Perrault very likely based his story about the girl and the wolf upon. Perrault's great artistic achievement consisted in his appropriating folk motifs, imbuing them with a different ideological content, and stylizing the elements of the plot in such a way that they would be more acceptable to his upper-class audiences, consisting both of children and adults (Zipes 1993: 28). Thus, it is of no surprise that his literary narrative marks a slow stagnation of the motifs in the story, given that his task was to adapt stories for an aristocratic audience.

What is of note is that there are great moral differences between the oral and the literary story developed first by Perrault and later the Brothers Grimm. In the story that we all know as LRRH today, the protagonist is portrayed as a helpless little girl who encounters a dangerous world when she decides to go out alone, refusing to heed the advice of adults. And, unsurprisingly, in the Brothers Grimm version, it is an adult male who helps her out of her debacle, when the hunter jumps to her rescue and kills the wolf. Ergo, in the written manifestation of the tale LRRH is depicted as a young woman who is ultimately dependent on men to move on. Indeed, the manner in which the wolf is disposed of forms the crux of the difference between the written and the oral versions of tale since in the oral version LRRH takes matters into her

own hands and escapes the wolf through her own devices, with no outside help whatsoever. Therefore, the oral story depicts a strong young woman who is about to become an adult and who through her own efforts and ingenuity can get out of any situation, whereas the written version casts LRRH in a role of dependency due to her gender. That the essence of a tale can have changed and stagnated to this extent due to a specific era's moral considerations, and that it can still be conveyed as a children's story today, is disturbing when viewed in this context.

THE THREE INSTALLATIONS

When looking at artistic activity in virtual worlds it very soon becomes apparent that a considerable amount of creative output is created along the lines of its physical counterpart with the objective of being viewed within a gallery/museum setting – albeit virtually. This accounts for the proliferation of virtual galleries and museums inside *SL* to which visitors are meant to come to with their avatars (very much as one would do so in Real Life with one's physical body) complete with openings and purchases of the displayed work – more often as limited editions but sometimes also as a unique original to which there would, of course, have to be a guarantee on behalf of the creator that there would be no further copies (Ayiter et al. 2013: 83).

There is, however, a further type of creative undertaking to be found in the metaverse that is extremely difficult to replicate in Real Life, and our collaborative project fell very much under this category. These are creations of all-inclusive environments, which come into being through a custom-created geography and climate, usually stretching themselves out over an entire metaverse simulator that is used to create a continuously engaging experience. This comprises many interrelated artefacts that cannot be easily separated from one another and that provide a complex visual/sonic system that calls to be perceived in its entirety, growing out of its own artificial ecology, meant to be visited and experienced therein. At the very least these spaces require a walk-through in order to be seen with full impact; however, at their best they will evoke remarkably heightened states of engagement in their visitors.

Such spaces may be thematic, indeed, sometimes they follow tangible concepts and storylines that may even be potentially defined as artistic 'Role Play environments' in which visitors are meant to experience the artwork by following up on the presented concepts/storylines through taking on the roles that are made available to them within the environment itself. However, in many cases these ecologies may also be based upon concepts and abstractions from which visitors are expected to derive their own meanings and experiences. To achieve such heightened levels of engagement in many of these all-inclusive virtual ecologies, the creators also often provide avatar costumes, which are deemed to be very effective devices in bringing about enhanced states of identification – a strategy which one of the artists, Alpha Auer, also put to good use in LRRH.

As a general rule such virtual art ecologies do not have a specific duration or a statically defined appearance; more often than not they will be around for many months, if not for years, whilst undergoing continuous changes during their lifespan. As is already implicit from this lack of predetermined timeframe, with this type of output the objective can be defined as an invitation for others to come and live inside the created space – to make it their own, and ultimately to become creatively active in it. The desire is that the piece slowly

unfolds through many lengthy visits, some lasting for days or even weeks, and that the incomers proceed to utilize the landscape for their own ends – to play in, and by extension, to become creatively active in on a personal level.

It is our observation that one of the most noteworthy things about metaverse creativity is that it breeds creativity in others; that one of the most vital forms of artistic interaction manifests in the form of a *cadavre exquis* in which artwork gets built through progressive layers in which an artist will use an existent artwork to further construct upon. Such second-order output is usually evidenced as virtual photography and machinima, which have become major creative outlets for many virtual-world residents, and through which they will derive their own imaginative interpretations that are often evidenced as remarkably sophisticated documentations of their experiences and playful activity within such ecosystem artworks. Other forms of output may involve storytelling that takes its trajectory from the art environment, either as in-world performative sessions, which are acted out inside the artwork itself, or as creative writing displayed on the many blogs that metaverse storytellers are known to keep (Ayiter et al. 2013: 84).

Given that what we wished for was the sort of immersive participation that would compel the visitor to breed tales and stories of their own, it was a foregone conclusion that we would build our three installations based upon an art ecology as is described above. The tale of LRRH has many layers of complexity that are open to many varied interpretations. Consequently, the three installations came out as diverse works – both from a visual standpoint, as well as the notions that each artist had drawn from the original tale and that they reflected through this visuality. Soror Nishi's output can be related to a wider concern that addresses the very landscape on which many folk tales are played out – the fantastical setting/flora of the enchanted forest of the tale itself. Cherry Manga and Alpha Auer, however, chose to

Figure 1: Alpha Auer, Second Life*, 2013. Alpha Auer's interpretation of the tale placed the wolf at centre stage as the martyr, and LRRH as the human villain who did not baulk at killing creatures that she deemed to be the 'other', when it suited the advancement of her own interests. Accordingly, the visual elements of Auer's art ecology were dark, dense, confusing and mournful. Photograph courtesy of the artist.*

Figure 2: Cherry Manga, Second Life, *2013. The sequential scenes that Cherry Manga created interpreted the oral tradition of the tale from a novel vantage point. Photograph courtesy of the artist.*

take a look at some of the confrontational aspects of the story: while Cherry Manga situated these within the sexual encounters/conflicts that are to be found in the oral version of the tale, Alpha Auer examined a conflict between human and beast, namely, humanity's brutality towards the wolf situated as 'the Other'.

Both Alpha Auer and Cherry Manga utilized three-dimensional humanoid or hybrid animal/human models that were meant to provide visual clues

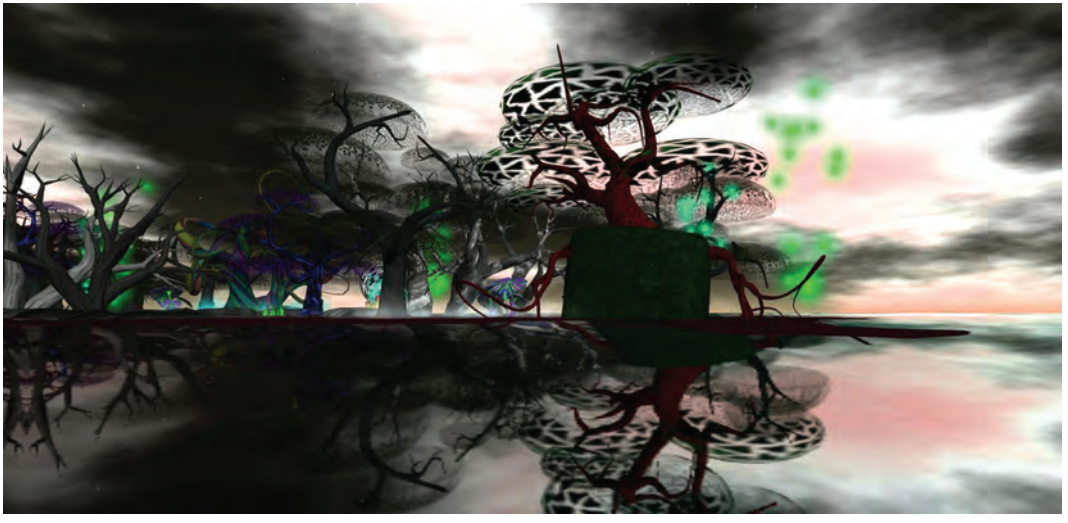

Figure 3: Soror Nishi, Second Life, *2013. Rather than delve upon the specifics of the tale, Soror Nishi chose to look at the environment, the Enchanted Forest, in which the story unfolded. Photograph courtesy of the artist.*

to the unfolding of the tale. In Alpha Auer's case these figurines were not placed in such a way that they would provide exit and entry points. There was no clear beginning or ending, instead visitors entered the story at a juncture where it was already at its peak point or even at a point of no return. Thus it was entirely up to the visitors to construct a story around a central stage that showed an impaled and dying wolf that was being mourned by his family. Further figurines depicting a number of rather scary LRRHs were scattered around the dark forest in a manner that was meant to accost and unsettle the wandering visitor. Since Auer's story was not a story in the truest sense of word, but instead was centred upon the visualization of a general concept of human cruelty to animals that took its symbolism from the tale of LRRH, this non-linear setup worked well in her case.

Conversely, Cherry Manga's installation comprised four sequential scenes that followed the plot of the French oral tradition, in which the young girl initially fools/tricks the wolf through sexual overtures after which she sleeps with him and then murders him; thus, taking her fate into her own hands. In Manga's installation the three-dimensional figurines were used to stage tableaux in which the encounter between girl and wolf, leading to a dance and sexual intercourse, were depicted, all of which led to a murder tableau that symbolized the emancipation of LRRH.

The third artist of the project, Soror Nishi, followed a distinctive course by focusing not directly on the tale itself, but instead upon the backdrop against which the tale was set – the Enchanted Forest. While Alpha Auer also devoted much of her building to the creation of a dark and ominous forest in which her story unfolded, Nishi placed the Enchanted Forest at the very centre of her artistic investigation, considering the flora of the woods almost as protagonists in their own right.

THE ENCHANTED/IMAGINED FOREST

Residing particularly in the realm of Germanic folk traditions, the Enchanted Forest is hermetic in its very essence – both a temple of holiness, as well as the abode of darkness, of evil and of danger. The forest has formed the context for heroic quests, a place where life had to be wrenched from the dark, foreboding wood with bravery and effort (Hacken 2008). 'It is in the forest that fairy-tale characters often lose their way and then find themselves again as their life's purpose becomes clear since the fairy tale forest has the power to change hearts and destinies' (Zipes 1987: 66). To early Germanic tribes, it was an object of worship – a temple of holiness – while to others it was the home of evil and danger. For later thinkers it stood as a model of immortality and regeneration; for others it perfectly illustrated the Darwinian struggle for survival.

Aside from this hermetic quality, the 'imagined forest' is also an intrinsically contradictory place: While it has formed the context for heroic quests, it has simultaneously been a backdrop for sorrow. It has been the asocial haunt of wild men, sociopaths and thieves, but it has also been the stage for social justice. It has been a moral exemplar but also a place to avoid.

The forest was the cultural context for the medieval quest, a place where life had to be wrenched from the dark, foreboding wood with bravery and effort. Forest darkness was not just an absence of light; it was an absence of humanity, friendship and morality. The inventory of dangers imagined in the forest grew from mythical wild men in league with the devil to dragons and

monsters. In black and white terms, the court was good and the forest was evil. This was fictional, of course, since the dichotomy ignored any treason, intrigue or violence found at court.

Not only during the mythical times of the medieval quests is the Enchanted/Imagined Forest and its inhabitants trees a source for generating symbols and metaphors for artists and writers: in the first decade of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka wrote that

> we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie smoothly and a little push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can't be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance.
>
> ([1912] 1995: 472–73)

It is in the forest that fairy-tale characters often lose their way and then find themselves again as their life's purpose becomes clear. The forest in question is not a small tract of woodland. It is always immense, unbounded and unknowable. The fairy-tale forest has power to change hearts and destinies. It is a meritocracy that distributes justice without regard to social class. Hansel and Gretel are not the only ones to get lost in the forest and then return wiser and fulfilled. They are not the only ones who need more than bread-crumbs to find their way, socially and morally as much as geographically. 'Menacing brambles and undergrowth through which the heroes have to pass could symbolize a deep-rooted psychological past that has to be cut through' (Ussher and Metzradt 1966: 35) as is also evidenced in Max Ernst imaginations of the forest from a Dadaist and surrealist perspective, bringing forth paintings such as *Pataphysical Forest*, *Great Forest* and *Last Forest*.

Virtual worlds such as *SL* can easily be tied into what has been discussed above regarding the quest for the 'self' within the imaginary and often times surreal scenery of the Enchanted Forest since these worlds provide us with a marked opportunity for creating imagined content that freely departs from the constrictions of Real-Life objects and contexts. Soror Nishi says that virtual worlds present her with an opportunity to experience a subconscious dream world while conscious. According to Nishi:

> The computer screen has more in common with stained glass than with photography or film and the extensive attempts some make to populate this new world with 'realistic' copies of the Old World show a colonial tendency to ignore the native culture and superimpose a preformed visual style on this new medium. This may be due to a fear of the new, or simply a lack of courage. Hopefully, Time will eradicate this anachronistic tendency.
>
> (Nishi 2010)

Just as Max Ernst did not attempt to paint his forests by depicting biologically correct fauna, Soror Nishi and Alpha Auer also constructed their forests out of plants that were based upon their subconscious imaginings: both artists populated their forests with trees that had trunks and branches that vaguely resembled physical trees. However, in both cases the similarity to real trees ended there. While Nishi covered hers with mushroom-like umbrellas that displayed geometric and fractal-based foliage, Auer created dense foliage, which was derived from German evolutionary biologist Ernst

Haeckel's book of illustrations called *Kunstformen der Natur* – a work that has often been criticized for sacrificing hard science to imagination and fantasy (Lötsch 1998: 354–56).

CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVE IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

There is a similarity between the oral tradition of storytelling and a narrative installation in the virtual world, and this resides in the meeting of the story with a pre-informed audience who nevertheless fully expected to hear the tale being retold in a novel and unexpected manner. This is evidenced in the work of Parry and Lord who researched the bards in the former Yugoslavia, looking for clues to the code for understanding the Homeric epics (Lord 2000: 12). Through this study they attained an understanding of how the oral tradition of storytelling operated before the written language became dominant. Within this tradition the listeners or community already knew the material that was to be told. Therefore, the storyteller's art consisted of how to compose a story in the here and now, in a novel way, for the current audience. In such a context it appears to be evident that following a linear structure in which events succeed one another will not work. Accordingly, the storyteller does not start at the beginning of the story, but perhaps in the middle, as is also the case in the Homeric epic of *The Iliad,* which does not commence at the actual beginning of the event – the divine party on Mount Olympus – but instead starts with the wrath of Achilles, an event that actually happens much later in the epic.

Narrative installations in a virtual world appear to work in a similar way in that visitors can wander in and out of the installations without following a linear direction, entering the story from any point of its unfolding, or indeed at a point of no return, as has been previously discussed.

What is equally significant, however, is that when we enter a narrative virtual world installation, we seem to inevitably enter into something an experience that lays the foundations for storytelling and retelling. An excellent example of this phenomenon has been provided by the avatar Saveme Oh, who improvised extensively in Cherry Manga's installation of LRRH. Her progression was documented by the avatar Marmaduke Arado through snapshots that were subsequently published on Oh's blog. When these shots were placed in a specific order and were accompanied by Oh's personal text, it was seen that she had brought forth an entirely new tale that emerged out of the original material that had been provided by Cherry Manga.

This phenomenon can also be related to Walter Benjamin, according to whom storytelling gives us 'the ability to exchange experiences' (2006: 362). In this context it is also noteworthy that Benjamin saw how an excess of information might create poor conditions for storytelling since a story has its basis in sensory involvements and when a story is being told, these are converted into the listener's experience:

> Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it.
>
> (2006: 365)

It is precisely due to this dependency on uniquely individual experiences that stories have a long life because this constant regeneration of experience posits that stories are meant to be perpetually retold. Thus, a story can only be based upon experience and not information, since information alone does not provide us with the prerequisites of perpetually rebuilding experience. In the case of LRRH it was things such as the choice of which protagonists to foreground, their depictions and attire, as well as the depiction of the environment in which they were placed, and the very non-linearity of the users' actions within this environment that were expected to build the unique, perpetually regenerated visitor experience.

What is also important for a story is its ultimate dependency on a plot, which can also be defined as a deliberate design that helps to make a point with a story. According to Kieran Egan, this resides upon a binary concept (1996) whereby a story is always developed in relation to a conflict or a tension. The story sorts and structures its content by this tension: a well-known circumstance through which binary opposites such as good/evil, greedy/generous, and ugly/beautiful make up the backbones of folk tales. In our project the plot, and its underlying tension of binary opposites, was revealed in the title of the project as it proclaimed that what the visitor was about to encounter was 'the other side of the story'. By this foreknowledge the necessary tension was created even before a visit to the installations.

For Roland Barthes a story is not just a chain of events, but an intricate system of units and rules, consisting of a series of levels that together create meaning. In accordance with these units and rules the story can be divided into three levels: level of functions, level of actions and level of narration. When it comes to the work discussed it may be beneficial to take a closer look at the level of function, which is the smallest narrative meaning-making unit, the essence of which it is to plant a seed that is harvested later in the story. Such functions can be divided into two categories: cardinal functions that are open-ended and lead to alternative consequences, in effect making the story a risky place to be; and catalyzer functions that are chronological and logical, and which therefore provide safe and luxurious places to be within the tale. To paraphrase Barthes: 'The catalyzer has a constant function which is [that] it maintains the contact between narrator and addressee' (Sontag 1982: 265).

Relating these Barthesian definitions to the artwork it can be established that Cherry Manga's approach involves the active usage of catalyzer functions, whereas both Alpha Auer's and Soror Nishi's work incorporated cardinal functions: although the four scenes that Cherry Manga created were placed on the land in a non-linear fashion, nevertheless the very fact that there were four of them and that they narrated progressive parts of the tale made it easy for visitors to follow the plot and the story's development, since ultimately there was no room for doubt as to which scene followed which.

Alpha Auer's installation, on the other hand, was charged with cardinal functions since the installation featured only one central scene, which was the apogee of a series of confusing events. The cardinal feature was emphasized by the fact that it was unclear as to who was the protagonist of the scene: was it LRRH sneaking away, the mourning wolf family or the sacrificed wolf? Such key questions inevitably left the progression of the plot very much up to the visitor. The same can also be said of Soror Nishi's Enchanted Forest, which presented a dilemma that stemmed from the very absence of

protagonists around which a predetermined sequence of events or a plot could be constructed, again very much leaving the visitors to their own devices when it came to a satisfactory resolution of the tale.

CONCLUSION

One of the wistful charms of virtual output is its transience: the three installations were open to visitors throughout spring 2013, and were visited by many avatars who took advantage of them to generate their own creative output, based upon what they encountered. In this regard, to judge by the amount of work generated by others, the project has turned out to be a success. In early summer, however, the installations were removed to make place for a new project of Mimesis Monday's. The three artists and the curator of the project are continuing their creative explorations in the metaverse.

Creating narrative environments in virtual worlds remains on the agenda for all of them since this is a subject that begs for much further investigation, both from a practice-based, as well as a theoretical standpoint. Indeed, the utilization of virtual worlds for storytelling purposes may turn out to be one of the main usages of these environments, given how easily spoken/textual content can be transformed into, as well as supplemented by, visuality and sound, potentially emerging as the three-dimensional, virtual continuation of the historically well-founded tradition of the illustrated, non-textual storybook. A further, parallel development may also be the provision of a platform that can revive the oral tradition of storytelling based upon experience, further enriched by the visual/audio content that are intrinsic features of these worlds.

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Heidi Dahlsveen has worked as a professional storyteller nationally and internationally since 1996. She has told in places such as The Barbican Center, London, Royal National Theatre London and in several festivals in Europe. Her main focus is to make traditional stories contemporary. Besides telling, Heidi is employed as Assistant Professor in Storytelling at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences. In 2008 she published an introductory book in storytelling.

Heidi also lives a virtual life, usually under the avatars Mimesis Monday or Frigg Ragu. In addition to being a virtual storyteller, she creates both static and moving poses. She owns the sim 'The Companion', built based on a Norwegian folk tale with the same name.

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